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Professor Joshua Lederberg  
Department of Genetics  
School of Medicine  
Stanford, California 94305

Dear Professor Lederberg:

I am sorry the footnote to my article in the ACM 25th Anniversary issue misled you about the 2nd edition of my book. The footnote was primarily a legal indication of the intent to use the material in the second edition.

In response to your note requesting background on the history and sociology of the BABEL phenomenon, I have a number of ideas but I don't know of any documents which discuss this directly (except the small amount of material in my own writings which deals with this). Unfortunately, in this area there are few facts and much opinion, and the historian will have a difficult time sorting things out in the future. For example, I have seen various articles written about the early development of COBOL; if one didn't already know that the same topic was being discussed I don't think a casual reader would be able to tell from reading the material. (As one of the writers I plead guilty to my own view of the matter.) I think this is a reflection of the elephant description syndrome.

I am not sure how many languages you are interested in pursuing. One realistic --although difficult and time-consuming--way of obtaining the information pertinent to the intent of a given language developer is to read the introduction to the language description/definition. I believe that for the past 8-9 years most language developers have felt a need (albeit small) to justify their new language. Hence the introduction tends to explain why this new language is different from, and better than, all others which might be considered similar. What of course is seldom written down is the well known phenomenon that it is fun to design a language, that one's personal tastes are often unsatisfied by another language, and that in a few cases it is really easier to develop something from the beginning than to learn the idiosyncrasies of what others have done.

I am sorry that I cannot be more specific. I am intrigued by the potential examination of this problem from a genetic viewpoint. Perhaps we might try to discuss this at some time if you are in Boston or if I get to the San Francisco area.

Sincerely yours,

  
Jean E. Sammet

JES:mr

SHM: 11-10-74